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Pint-sized hero soars on to the big screen



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Child star turns into Astro Boy

The legendary Japanese hero returns to charm children across the world all over again, writes **Andrew Fenton**

IT'S 7am and Freddie Highmore is getting ready for another day of his final year at school. But unlike most of his compatriots at the Highgate School in London, the 17-year-old also has to fit in a quick interview with the Australian press before he sets off.

"I've been at this school for a while now which is one of the nice things about it," he says, in a rather well-spoken voice that reminds one of *Harry Potter* star Daniel Radcliffe. "I know all the people there and they don't really see me any differently now I've done a few films. Everyone is quite welcoming so it's easy to just slot back in."

Highmore has been working in the movie business for about a decade now, starting his career on British TV with *Happy Birthday Shakespeare* and *I Saw You* before landing his breakthrough role as Peter in the 2004 movie *Finding Neverland* opposite Johnny Depp. He re-teamed with Depp for *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* the following year and more recently he's starred in *August Rush* and *The Spiderwick Chronicles*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the young actor sees Depp both as a role model and a close friend.

"We keep in contact and see each other whenever we're in the same country," he says. "Everyone respects him, which I

think is down to the fact he's such a nice guy – he's not the typical image you have of a Hollywood actor who's got it all. He's genuinely down to earth and a true friend. But he's also someone I look up to as an actor."

Highmore says one thing that particularly impresses him about Depp is his chameleon-like ability to vary the parts he plays and not get tied down to genres or stereotypes. "If I was able to replicate that on a smaller level through acting, it would be fantastic," he says.

In that sense, the new computer-animated *Astro Boy* is probably a good choice as it's the first time Highmore has played a robot boy from the future who has machine guns in his bottom.

In fact, he'd never even seen or read any of the various incarnations of the popular Japanese manga and anime character, until he was offered the vocal role while doing a publicity tour for another movie – Luc Besson's *Arthur and The Invisibles*. As luck would have it, shortly thereafter the press tour stopped off in Tokyo.

"I didn't realise just how big he was in Japan," says Highmore. "As you step off the plane there are Astro Boy stores, there are museums and statues dedicated to him and you realise just how much the Japanese love him. And you hope to be

able to bring that excitement to everybody else through the film."

Those who grew up with the 1980s *Astro Boy* cartoon will discover the new Hollywood film is surprisingly faithful to the look of the characters, but the plot takes a few sharp turns. That said, all the basic elements are there. Brilliant scientist Dr Tenma (Nicolas Cage) creates Astro Boy, a robot with incredible powers, in the image of his recently deceased son. But he soon discovers the robot replacement does little to alleviate his grief and casts him out.

Astro Boy hooks up with a group of rowdy orphans including Cora (Kristen Bell), while the evil President Stone (Donald Sutherland) attempts to track him down to steal his energy source. And of course, there is an obligatory final battle between Astro Boy and a bloody great robot, this time a robot version of President Stone.

At its heart, *Astro Boy* has always been something of a modern version of *Pinocchio*. "I think it is a bit like that," Highmore says. "Astro Boy is on a quest to be accepted into the world. He's a human but trapped inside a robot's body, just like Pinocchio was a human trapped inside a puppet's body."

It sounds very much like the young film

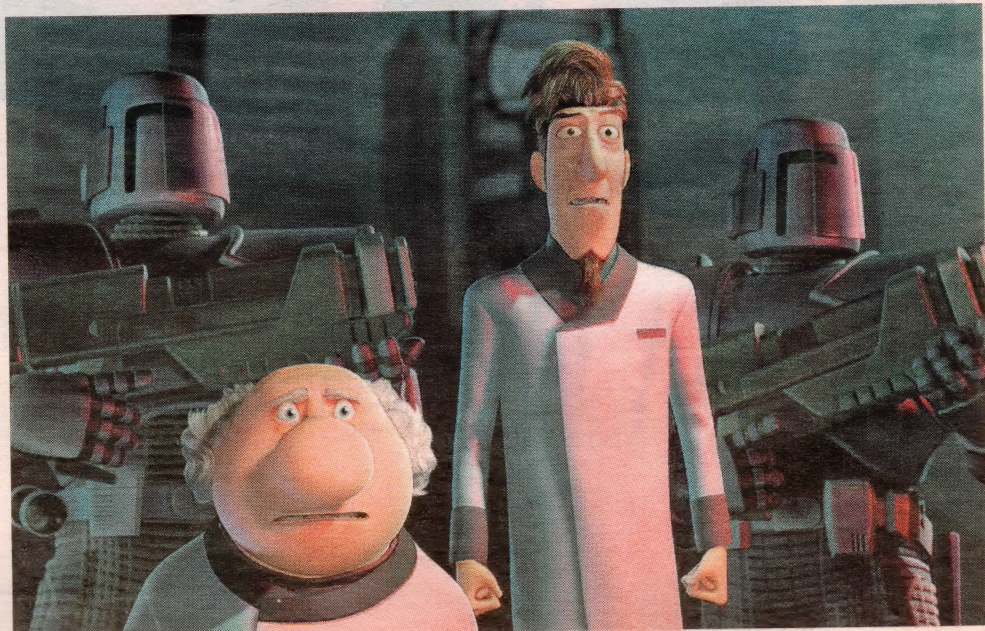
star can relate to Astro Boy's dilemma of being special and different, while at the same time yearning for acceptance from his peers.

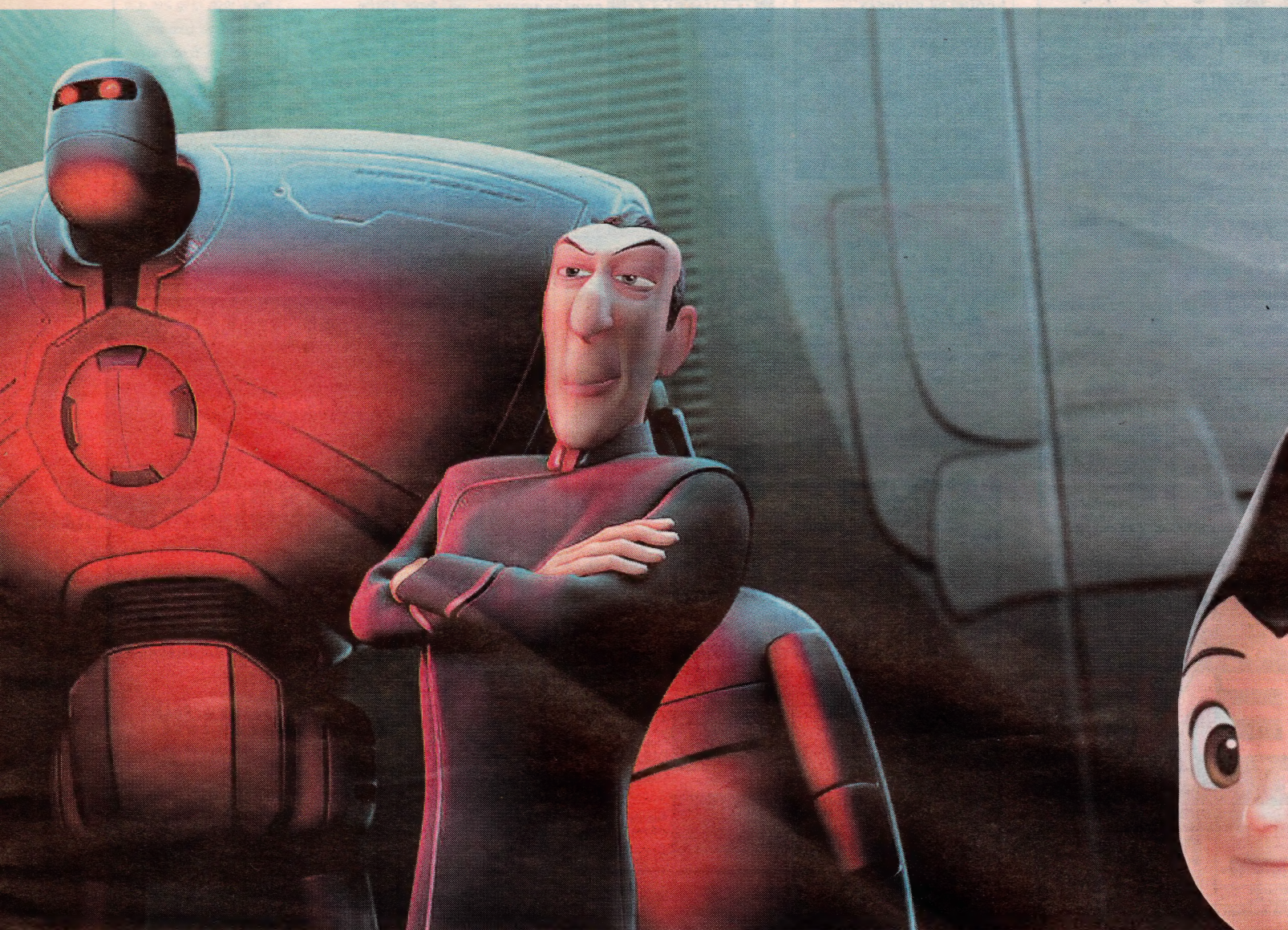
"He's got everything, he can fly, he can drill his way through solid rock, he can do everything that a kid would say they want to do except he just can't fit in and find his place in society," Highmore says. "What makes us unique can also make us someone who is picked on – even if it's great what we do. I think everyone can relate to wanting to be like everyone else and have friends and get along with everybody."

Highmore says he tries to give a very physical performance in the recording studio, even though the only movements the animators matched were those of his lips (he had a video camera trained on him as he read the lines).

"I move around quite a bit when doing the voice," he says. "It helps give it a certain edge and make it feel real. If your character is running and out of breath and your just sitting there in a chair and doing it into a microphone, I think people are going to realise you're trying to fake it. I tried to make it as real as possible and give my all to the character."

Of course, like all animated films the actors were recorded separately, so all of the conversations are actually elaborately





constructed artifices. Despite talking to them at length on screen, Highmore has met a grand total of one of his co-stars so far.

"I was at Comic Con earlier this year and I met Kristen Bell, that's the only person so far," he says. "Hopefully soon, I'll get to meet the rest!"

Highmore has increasingly been thinking about his future, and has decided he will attend university. That said, he's not entirely sure what subjects, other than continuing on with his French and Spanish studies.

"The British system is quite nice if you know what you want to do from an early age but if you don't know you end up having to make a decision very early on about something you're not sure about," he says.

The young actor is also mindful that making the transition from child star to credible actor can be difficult. "It's tricky," he says. Earlier this year though, he shot the adult drama *Master Harold and The Boys* in South Africa.

"It's based on the apartheid and that was something that was more of a drama based on the horrific events of the time. It's the sort of role I hope to play more of in the future. It was definitely moving onward and upward in terms of choosing older roles."

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I think everyone can relate to wanting to be like everyone else and have friends

ANTICIPATED RETURN: The new film (top) is surprisingly faithful to the look of the original characters (left), with a compromise reached to make Astro Boy look slightly older (right).

The creation of a comic legend



BOY WONDER: Creator Osamu Tezuka.

- Astro Boy was created by Osamu Tezuka in 1951 in his legendary manga (Japanese comic book).

- Tezuka is known as the "god of manga" and the "father of anime".

- Astro Boy became a television star in 1963, with his debut in a black-and-white television series in Japan. The series included 193 episodes and ended on December 31, 1966.

- The series was remade for TV in 1982. The boy robot, who is a Japanese icon in the same way Mickey Mouse is to Americans, became a hit

- in the Australian market with 52 episodes made.

- In 1999, Sony purchased the movie rights but the project stalled.

- Another television series was made in the US in 2003, four years after Osamu Tezuka died in Osaka.

- In 2004, Astro Boy was inducted into the Robot Hall of Fame alongside C-3PO from *Star Wars* and Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet*.

- *Empire* magazine listed Astro Boy 43rd of 50 Greatest Comic Characters.

